

Birden

In Japan, hydrangeas (ajisai)(紫陽花) symbolize heartfelt emotion, gratitude, and apology, stemming from a legend where an emperor gave them as an apology for neglecting his love.

Their color-changing ability reflects shifting emotions, representing change, understanding, and sometimes coldness or patience, tied to the rainy season they bloom in, making them emblems of deep feeling and the transient nature of life.

Lego

The morning light, thick and golden, spills through the gap in my curtains, illuminating a universe of chaos. My apartment. My sanctuary. To anyone else, it's a mess. To me, it's a nest.

My apartment is a soft, cluttered fortress against the rest of the world. To anyone else, it looks like a nursery for a child who never grew up: piles of plushies—frogs, bears, and long-limbed cats—spilling off the sofa, mountains of knitted blankets in every pastel shade imaginable, and racks of clothes that look more like costumes than a wardrobe. But at nineteen, I know exactly why I live like this. When you've been living alone since you were sixteen because your parents decided you didn't fit into their new, "happy" families, you learn to manufacture your own warmth.

I sat at my desk, the glow of the computer monitor catching the silk ribbons at the ends of my two braids. I was still in my pajamas—oversized silk pants with tiny ducks on them—and I looked at the screen, clicking through the raw files Tui had sent over this morning.

Yesterday's shoot.

Hong's new line was incredible—structural, yet soft enough for someone like me. In the photos, Tui had captured something I didn't always see in the mirror. He used a lens that made the light look like honey. I looked... significant. I wasn't just the "flower shop kid" or the "extra person" in a room. Under Tui's direction and Hong's fabric, I looked like someone who belonged. Me, in Hong's clothes. A simple linen shirt, wide-legged trousers. I look... different. Not just Lego, William's friend. I look like a person. A model. I lean closer, tracing my own face on the screen. The confidence in my eyes is new. Tui captured it. Hong's clothes gave it to me.

I tapped my nails against the edge of the keyboard. They were slightly long, painted with tiny white flowers with bright yellow centers—miniature daisies that reminded me of summer mornings. I had spent an hour on them last night, a meditative act to keep my mind off the cold, sharp memory of William's voice from last Wednesday.

"I'm busy right now. Can we reschedule?"

I looked over at the kitchen counter. There, in a simple glass vase, sat the hydrangeas I had prepared. Large, round clusters of deep blue and violet. They looked heavy, almost mocking in their perfection. They seemed to whisper: Are you really going back? Are you going to risk that look on his face again?

I bit my lip, feeling the familiar sting of tears. I didn't want to be the "interruption." I didn't want to see that stiff jaw or the way he looked at Est like he was the only source of oxygen in a vacuum.

The memory of last Wednesday crashes down—the cold silence, the way he looked through me, the sharp, dismissive “I’m busy.” The rejection still stings, a dull ache behind my ribs. I’d gone home and cried into a pillow shaped like a giant squid.

But today is different. I promised myself.

I stood up, my knees cracking, and walked into the small living room.

There, hanging right next to the door, was the photo. It was an old one, the edges slightly yellowed. Young William and young me, sitting in his mother’s garden. We were covered in dirt, holding up half-eaten mangoes, and behind us, William’s mother was laughing.

Her eyes were the brightest part of the photo. Even through the film, they sparkled with a kind of fierce, unconditional love. She was the one who told me I was a "sprout" that would someday bloom into something magnificent. She was the one who made me feel like I wasn't a burden for needing a place to stay.

I reach out and touch the glass right over her face.

“Hi, Auntie.” I murmur. “I’m going to go see him. He’s being an idiot again. I’m a little scared.”

"Give me a little bit of that." I whispered. "Just enough for today."

Her smile doesn't waver. It just says, “Go on, then. He’s just a boy who’s lost. Be kind.”

A breath I didn't know I was holding whooshes out of me.

Okay.

I can do this.

The cold of last Wednesday—the rain, the dismissal, the feeling of being replaced—began to melt, replaced by the memory of her iced tea and her pink apron. William was lost. He was taking ten steps back for every step forward. He was scared of Est, and he was taking it out on the only person who knew how to handle his silence.

I wasn't going there to be a martyr. I was going there because he was my best

friend, and his mother wouldn't have let him sit in a dark room and rot, and neither would I.

I moved to my closet, I gather my courage. It feels like trying to scoop water with my hands, but I try anyway. I walk to my closet and start pulling out clothes. Not the pajamas. Not the model clothes. Just... me. Jeans. A soft, oversized band t-shirt. My favorite worn-out hoodie

I unbraided my hair, letting the waves fall over my shoulders, and reapplied the tint to my lips. I looked at my flowered nails one last time and curled my fingers into a fist.

"Okay." I said to the empty, plush-filled room. "Let's go bring the light back."

I grabbed the hydrangeas and the bag of homemade soup I'd prepared.

At the door, I take one last look at my chaotic, childish, perfect apartment. Then I look back at the photo.

Aunty's bright eyes give me courage for everything.

I'm going to my best friend's house. And I'm going to forget the cold of last Wednesday. Even if I have to thaw him with the sheer force of my own ridiculousness. I stepped out of my fortress, locked the door, and headed toward the penthouse. I wouldn't let him be alone, even if he thought that was what he wanted. I knew him better than he knew himself. I knew the shadow, but I also knew the garden. And I wasn't giving up on the garden.

The hydrangeas were heavy, their pale blue heads bobbing against my chest.

Wednesday.

It was our day. Our unspoken, sacred ritual. But today, standing outside William's door, the flowers felt less like a gift and more like an apology I hadn't figured out how to voice.

The door swings open, and there he is.

William looks like he hasn't slept—hair a mess, paint smudged on his jaw, wearing the same hoodie from days ago. But he smiles when he sees me, that same quiet, devastating smile that makes my chest ache in a way I've learned to live with.

"Lego." he said. His voice was rough, like he hadn't used it in hours.

"Hydrangeas." I say, holding them out like a shield. "The supplier messed up the order, so we got them for free." It was a lie. I'd paid full price because they were the exact shade of blue he used when he was trying to paint the sky without making it

look lonely.

He takes them, burying his face in the petals for a second longer than necessary. When he looks back at me, his eyes are clearer, but there's a tension in his shoulders that wasn't there before.

"You're late," he murmured.

My stomach twists. I was fifteen minutes late. He didn't know. About the shoot. About the time I've been spending with Tui, with Hong, trying to fill the space William left behind.

"Sorry." I manage, my voice too bright. "I had a shoot."

His eyes flick to the bag slung over my shoulder. "Modeling?"

"Yeah." I hesitate. I could tell him it was for a clothing brand, that Hong designed the pieces, that Tui was there, that it was fun and easy and I didn't think about William once. "Just a small thing. For a friend."

But that would be a lie.

"Modeling," William repeats, and the word sounds foreign in his mouth, like he's tasting something sour. "Who for?"

"A friend's brand. Hong. You don't know him." I shift my weight, ready to deflect. "I made soup. Want some?"

William nodded, a small, jerky movement. "Okay." Stepping back to let me in.

Silence stretched between us, thick and suffocating. It wasn't the comfortable silence of our old Wednesdays. It was heavy with things unsaid. With names we weren't speaking.

Est.

I wanted to ask. What's he like? Did you kiss him? Did you tell him about mom?

But the words stuck in my throat. Because what if William said, He's nothing special? That would mean I'd been replaced by someone ordinary. Or worse—what if he said, He's everything?

The apartment is chaos.

His apartment, usually sparse and meticulously ordered, looked like a bomb had gone off inside a paint factory. Canvases were everywhere—leaning against walls, propped on chairs, lying flat on the floor. Paint tubes were scattered like spent shell casings. Brushes sat in jars of murky water that smelled sharp and chemical. Not the organized chaos of a creative workspace, but the kind that makes my breath

catch. Paint tubes scattered like fallen soldiers, rags crumpled on the floor, a half-empty mug of coffee on the windowsill with a film of dust on top. The air smells like turpentine and old grief.

And the paintings.

There are so many paintings. Canvases stacked against walls, some covered in cloth, some raw and unfinished. I catch glimpses—violent colors, abstract shapes, something that looks like a house collapsing.

"William." I breathe. "What happened?"

He's already in the kitchen, pulling a pot from the stove. "I fired the cleaning lady."

I freeze. "What? Why?"

He doesn't look at me. "I didn't want any more people in my apartment. Just... too many people." The words hang there. Too many people. I'm people. Est is people. The world is people.

William didn't look at me. He was picking at a fleck of blue paint on his knuckle. "Too many people." he whispered. "In my space. Asking questions. Looking at me."

"She looks." he insisted, his voice rising, thin and frantic. "She looks at the paintings. She looks at the mess. She looks at me like I'm a tragedy she has to clean up." He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.

"William." I say carefully, setting the flowers on the counter. "You can't live like this."

"Why not?" He turns, and his eyes are red-rimmed, his jaw tight. "It's mine. My mess. My... life."

"I just wanted it to be quiet." he said, his voice cracking. "I just wanted everyone to stop looking."

"It's okay." I said, reaching out to touch his arm. He flinched, then leaned into the touch, starved for it. "It's okay. We can clean. I'll help."

"No." he said. "You shouldn't have to."

"I want to."

I start cleaning. It's automatic, a reflex. I pick up the paint tubes, cap them, line them up by color like I've seen him do a hundred times. I gather the rags, toss them in the laundry basket by the door. I wipe down the counter, moving around him like I'm trying not to spook a wild animal. It was soothing, putting order back into his chaos. He watches me, his arms crossed, his foot tapping a frantic rhythm against the floor.

"Stop." he says finally, his voice cracking. "Just... stop."

I freeze, a damp rag in my hand.

"I'm not a project, Lego." he says, and the words are sharp, but his voice is shaking. "You can't just come in here and fix me. You can't keep bringing flowers and soup and pretending everything is fine when it's not."

"I'm not pretending," I say, but even to my own ears, it sounds thin.

"Yes, you are!" He runs a hand through his hair, pulling at the strands. "You're always fine. You're always... on. Bright and cheerful and taking care of everyone. But I'm not fine, Lego. I'm so fucking far from fine."

I set the rag down. "I know you're not. That's why I'm here."

"Why?" he demands, stepping closer. "Why do you keep coming back? After I dismissed you, after I didn't answer your messages, after I treated you like... like an afterthought. Why?" The question hits me like a punch. I've asked myself the same thing a hundred times, standing outside his door with flowers, waiting for the click of the lock.

"Because." I say, my voice barely a whisper. "you're my best friend. And I love you."

He flinches like I've struck him.

"Don't." he chokes out. "Don't say that. Not when I'm like this. Not when I don't deserve it."

"You don't get to decide what I deserve."

He sinks onto the floor, his back against the kitchen cabinets, and buries his face in his hands. His shoulders shake. I've seen him cry before—after his mother died, when his father left—but never like this. This is something raw and ugly, like he's breaking apart from the inside out.

I sit down across from him, cross-legged on the paint-stained floor.

"Talk to me." I say softly.

It takes a long time. He breathes, ragged and wet, his hands still hiding his face. I wait. I've learned to wait for William. Finally, he drops his hands. His eyes are wrecked.

"I took one step forward." he says, his voice hoarse. "I thought I was doing better. Answering emails, making calls, going to the gallery meeting. And then... ten steps back. I feel like I'm drowning again, and this time, I don't even know why."

"It's okay to go backward." I say, repeating the words of his therapist. "Healing isn't

a straight line."

He laughs, a broken, bitter sound. "It feels like I'm failing at failing correctly."

He tells me about the exhibition. About the pressure, the expectations. About his father's text message—list the house, move on—and how it shattered him. About the paintings he's been making, violent and true and terrifying. And then, quiet as a secret, he tells me about Est.

"We kissed." he says, staring at a spot on the floor between us. "It was... I don't know how to describe it. Like the world stopped spinning for a second. Like I could breathe."

I nod, my throat tight. "That's good, right?"

"I thought so." He picks at a fleck of dried paint on his jeans. "But now I'm terrified. Of what it means. Of how much I want it. Of how I'm going to ruin it, like I ruin everything."

He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. We stayed like that for a long time, breathing together in the quiet wreck of his apartment.

"He's nice." William whispered after a while. "Est. He... he takes pictures of things people usually ignore. Broken things. Quiet things."

"He sounds like someone who would understand," I said.

"Maybe." William said. "Or maybe he's just polite."

"William." I said, pulling back to look him in the eye. "He kissed you back, didn't he?"

A faint flush crept up William's neck. "Yeah."

"Then he's not just being polite."

He looks at me then, really looks at me, and his eyes are so full of guilt it makes my chest ache.

"I'm sorry." he says. "For how I treated you. For pushing you away. It wasn't about you. It was... I got so caught up in the possibility of him that I forgot about the certainty of you."

"William." I say, and my voice is steady now. "You're allowed to have both."

He shakes his head.

He stares at me for a long moment, then nods, a single, jerky movement. "Okay."

I stand up, offering him my hand. He takes it, his fingers cold and paint-streaked. I pull him to his feet.

"Now." I say, "let's finish cleaning up. And then we'll eat soup."

William's smile reaches his eyes.

"Thank you." he says, and it's not just for the soup, or the flowers, or the cleaning. It's for staying.

William let out a wet, shaky laugh. "God, I'm a disaster."

"Yep." I agreed, grinning. "But you're my disaster. And we're going to fix this. First the soup. Then a shower."

As we ate—sitting on the floor because the table was covered in flowers and paint tubes—William told me more. About the portrait he'd sketched of Est. About the way Est looked at the city like it was a secret code. About how terrified he was that he'd ruined everything by not telling Est about the exhibition. And I listened my role was changing. I wasn't the only person in William's world anymore.

And...that was okay.

Because looking at him now—hair a mess, paint on his face, but eyes brighter than they'd been in months—I saw something new.

Hope.

Messy, terrified, fragile hope.

And if Est was the reason for that... then I could make room for him.

We finish cleaning in silence. Not the awkward kind, but the kind that comes after everything's been said. The kind where words aren't needed anymore. I scrub the counter while William sweeps up the dried paint flakes. He works methodically, the broom making soft shushing sounds against the concrete. I steal glances at him—his hair falling into his eyes, the way his shoulders have finally unclenched, the faint smear of yellow paint still on his jaw that he doesn't know is there.

He's beautiful like this. Not the posed, distant William of gallery photos. Just William. Tired and trying and still here. The last canvas goes back onto the stack in the corner. The brushes soak in cleaner. The rags pile into the laundry hamper. It's not perfect—the studio still looks lived-in, still smells like turpentine and fresh starts—but it's better. Cleaner. Lighter.

"Good." I stand, gathering the bowls. "Now help me with these, and then we can do



something fun."

"Fun?" He sounds suspicious, but he's already rinsing bowls under the hot water.

"Remember when we were kids?" I say, drying as he washes. "Your mom's kitchen table, that massive sketchbook, drawing until our hands cramped?"

He pauses, water running. "The window overlooking the garden?"

"Yeah. We'd draw the same thing a hundred times—the roses, the bird feeder, that stupid gnome your dad hated."

William laughs—a real laugh, startled out of him. "The gnome. God, I forgot about the gnome."

"Come on." I dry the last bowl and nudge him toward the living room. "I know you still have sketchbooks."

The washing machine hums in the background, a low, steady vibration. I dig through the stack of art supplies until I find it—a thick sketchbook, the cover soft with age, corners bumped from years of use. I flip it open to a clean page and hand William a pencil.

"Here." I grab another pencil for myself, settling cross-legged on the rug. "Just like old times."

He hesitates, looking at the blank page like it's a dare. Then he sits beside me, back against the couch, knees drawn up. The position is familiar—exactly how we sat when we were young, too big for kids' furniture but not quite grown. Outside the massive window, the city sprawls endlessly—lights blinking like distant stars, traffic moving in rivers of red and white. It's not his mother's garden, not the roses or the bird feeder or the gnome, but it's something. It's now.

"What do we draw?" he asks, pencil hovering.

I tilt my head, considering the view. "That building. The one with the weird lights."

He squints. "The pyramid?"

"Yeah. But make it ridiculous."

His mouth quirks. "How ridiculous?"

"Like it's alive. Eyes in the windows. Mouth where the lobby is."

He snorts. "You're still terrible at this."

"Then draw better." I stick out my tongue.

He starts sketching—quick, confident lines. I do the same, but mine is messier, more chaotic. We work in silence for a while, the scratch of pencils the only sound besides the washing machine.

"This takes me back." he says quietly, not looking up from his page.

"Yeah." I add googly eyes to the pyramid's top floor. "Your mom's kitchen. The garden. She'd bring us iced tea and pretend not to notice when we got graphite all over the tablecloth."

"She'd laugh." His voice catches slightly. "Said it was 'character.'"

I glance at him. His jaw is tight, eyes focused too hard on his drawing. "She was right."

"Yeah." He adds flames coming out of the lobby. "You were always better at this. Still are."

"Liar." I hold up my page—pyramid monster eating a scooter. "Yours looks like actual art."

He glances at it, then snorts. "Mine looks like a drunk architect drew it."

We laugh, and the sound fills the room. Real laughter, the kind that makes your stomach ache. For a moment, we're thirteen again—two kids with too much grief and too many pencils, drawing monsters to keep the real ones away.

The washing machine dings, startling us both. William's pyramid now has tentacles; mine is wearing sunglasses.

"I'll get it." I say, unfolding my legs. My knees pop. "Old age."

"Speak for yourself." he grumbles, but he's smiling.

In the laundry room, I pull out the damp clothes—his shirts, my hoodie from the other day, rags stained with every color of the rainbow. I toss them into the dryer, add a dryer sheet that smells like clean linen.

When I come back, William's flipped to a new page. He's drawn the two of us—not kids, not adults, just shapes sitting by a window. Simple lines. Honest.

"Your turn." he says, handing me the pencil. "Fix it."

I sit beside him, our shoulders brushing. I add color—not with pencils, but with my words.

"Here." I say, pointing to the window. "That's the garden. Roses. Bird feeder. Gnome."

He nods. "And here"—he taps the shapes—"that's us."

"Always." I say.

We sit there, pencils forgotten, watching the city move. The washing machine hums in the background. The sketchbook lies open between us. The apartment doesn't feel like a cage. It feels like home.

The hum of the dryer became the drone of a summer cicada. The scent of clean linen morphed into the heavy, sweet fragrance of blooming jasmine and damp earth.

In the dream, the world isn't sharp. It's painted with watercolors—soft, bleeding edges where the gold of the sun spills into the vibrant emerald of the grass.

I'm small. My knees are bony and scraped.

We are small.

I am sitting on a thick, quilted blanket spread out in the courtyard of his mother's old house. The stone walls are draped in bougainvillea, pink petals drifting down like confetti. I can feel the prickle of heat on my neck and the cool dampness of the ground beneath the fabric.

"Got you!"

The voice is high, bright, and full of a mischief that hasn't been tempered by grief yet.

Suddenly, I am on my back, the breath knocked out of me not by pain, but by surprise. Young William is hovering over me, his hair a messy crown of dark silk, his eyes wide and sparking with life. His hands find my ribs, and the world dissolves into a riot of sensation.

"No! Liam! Stop!" I'm shrieking, my voice cracking with a level of joy that feels foreign now. I'm squirming, kicking my legs, my eyes watering from the sheer force of my laughter. It's the kind of laughter that hurts, the kind that makes you feel like you might actually burst into a thousand pieces of light. I gasp, trying to wriggle away, but he's stronger. He's always been stronger.

"Make me!" he shouts, grinning, a gap-toothed, mischievous grin that means trouble. His fingers find a new spot, and I shriek, my back arching off the blanket. The world is a dizzy spin of blue sky, green leaves, and William's triumphant face.

William doesn't stop. He's grinning, his cheeks flushed pink, pressing his weight into me as he keeps his fingers moving. For a moment, we aren't two boys with broken

families or looming shadows. We are just two points of energy, tethered together by a blanket in a garden that feels like the entire universe.

"Boys! Not so rough, you'll tear the blanket."

The back door creaks open. I see her through the haze of my own happy tears.

William's mother.

She looks like a portrait of peace. She's wearing that pink apron—the one with the white ribbons tied into perfect bows at her waist—that always smelled like cinnamon and expensive soap. She's carrying a silver tray, the ice cubes in the tall glasses of tea clinking a rhythmic, icy melody.

"William, let Lego breathe," she says, though her voice is heavy with a smile. She sets the tray down at the edge of the blanket, her movements graceful and sure. She reaches out, ruffling William's hair as he finally relents, falling back onto the grass beside me, both of us gasping for air.

"You look like two little drowned rats." she teases, leaning down to press a cool hand to William's forehead, then mine. Her touch is the anchor of the world. As long as she is there, the sun will stay out. As long as she is there, we are safe.

I look at William. He's staring up at the sky, one hand reaching out to catch a drifting bougainvillea petal. He looks... perfect. Unburdened.

I reach out and grab his hand, my fingers small and sticky from the garden. He squeezes back, his grip firm.

"Don't let go." I whisper in the dream.

That's what I'm fighting for.

But the watercolor starts to run. The green of the grass bleeds into a muddy gray. The pink of the apron fades until it's white, then transparent. The sound of his mother's humming is swallowed by a low, mechanical thrum. I wake up with the taste of jasmine tea on the back of my throat.

The apartment is dim, lit only by the soft glow of the lamp by the sofa. The dryer has stopped. The sketchbook lies open on the rug between us, filled with monsters and pyramids and a simple drawing of two shapes sitting together.

William is still there. He's leaned his head back against the cushions of the couch, his eyes closed. He isn't thirteen anymore. The silkiness of his hair is the same, but the eyes underneath those lids are tired. The hands resting on his lap are stained with the colors of the ghosts he's been fighting all night.

I watch the steady rise and fall of his chest.

I want to tell him about the dream. I want to tell him I saw her. I want to tell him that for a second, we were on that blanket again and nothing had been lost yet.

But I don't. Instead, I quietly reach out and pull the knitted blanket up over his shoulders, tucking it in just the way his mother used to.

He stirs slightly, a soft sound escaping him—not a groan, but a sigh of relief.

I settle back onto the floor, my shoulder pressing against the couch near his knee. The city continues its mindless roar outside the window, but in here, for tonight, the shadows have retreated. I pick up the pencil and, on the very edge of the page, I draw a tiny, hidden flower. A hydrangea. A quiet promise that even if the garden is gone, I'm still standing at the gate.